Satisfied and dissatisfied couples: Positive and negative dimensions, conflict styles, and relationships with family of origin

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Positive and Negative Dimensions, Conflict Styles and Relationships with Family of Origin in Satisfied and Dissatisfied Couples

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Abstract

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Results indicated that in comparison to distressed couples, nondistressed couples have more positive and less negative dimensions, a higher ratio between positivity and negativity, more appropriate conflict styles (more compromise and less violence, avoidance and offence) as well as a better relationship with their family of origin. Satisfied couples significantly showed the highest levels of positive dimensions, while couples in therapy reported the highest levels of negative dimensions. Dissatisfied couples were in-between.

Keywords: marriage, conflict, family of origin, positivity, negativity.

Studies on marital functioning have received increased attention over the last decades. Recently Fincham and Beach (1999) have stimulated an interesting discussion in stating that marital quality is not necessarily the opposite of marital distress (see also Weiss & Heyman, 1997) but may rather be constituted by positive and negative dimensions that co-exist (Fincham, 1998; Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Gottman, 1994; Scabini & Cigoli, 2000). According to this assumption, nondistressed couples are characterised by mostly positive dimensions (and low levels of negative dimensions) while distressed couples show mostly negative dimensions, even though some positive dimensions may coexist at the same time. According to Gottman's balance theory (Gottman, 1993, 1994) the ratio of positive to negative behavior is essential for understanding marital quality. He suggested a ratio of 5:1 (positivity to negativity) for satisfied couples, showing that also happy couples often do behave in a negative manner, but this negativity is buffered by a greater amount of positive behaviors. Based on these approaches, marital quality is always characterized by both, negative dimensions (e.g., conflicts, negative attitudes) as well as positive dimensions (e.g., love, affection, positive attitudes etc.).

Gilford and Bengston (1979) were among the first to describe marital quality using separate negative and positive dimensions: they found that young couples report many positive as well as negative aspects in their relationship while couples with a longer marital history report a moderately elevated quantity of positive dimensions but few negative aspects. More recently, Johnson, Amoloza and Booth (1992) found that positive dimensions (in terms of happiness and marital interaction) decline over time, while negative dimensions (in terms of problematic aspects, discord and the propensity to divorce) do not seem to increase significantly. Fincham and Linfield (1997) assume that marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction do not represent two mutually exclusive states. Therefore, the presence of positive dimensions does not exclude the possibility of perceived negative dimensions as well. Among the positive dimensions that most powerfully distinguish satisfied from dissatisfied couples, the quality of marital communication (communicative openness,

emotional self-disclosure, empathic understanding etc.) (e.g., Cusinato & Cristante, 1999; Noller & Feeney, 1998; Scabini & Cigoli, 2000; Weiss, & Heyman, 1997) and dyadic coping or social support provided by the partner play a crucial role (e.g., Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Bodenmann, 1997, 2000, 2005; Carels & Baucom, 1999; Cutrona, 1996; DeLongis, Capreol, Holtzman, O'Brien, & Campbell, 2004; Story & Bradbury, 2004).

Both positive dimensions contribute significantly to a higher marital quality, the maintenance of satisfaction and a positive developmental course of marriage (Bodenmann & Cina, in press; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). On the other hand, a number of studies reveal that negative attitudes and behaviours have a greater impact on marital quality than positive attitudes and behaviours, going along with a high likelihood of negative reciprocity (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Burman, John & Margolin, 1992; Gottman, 1994; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991).

Bradbury, Rogge and Lawrence (2001) as well as Driver and Gottman (2004) highlight the crucial role played by conflict for marital satisfaction. In determining whether dyadic conflict is negative or positive, the modality of conflict resolution (constructive/co-operative as opposed to destructive/competitive styles) is decisive. Much research has supported the notion that the way conflicts are managed turns out to be more important than the content of the conflict (Markman, Stanley, Blumberg, 2001; Sanford, 2003). A co-operative style is characterised by negotiation, compromise and constructive problem solving. A competitive style includes offence, violence and coercion. An avoidant conflict style, on the other hand, might be primarily negative when it is too frequently applied (Bertoni & Iafrate, 2000). Cooperative conflict resolution modalities are associated with higher marital satisfaction (Bertoni & Iafrate, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Kurkek, 1995; Noller & Feeney, 1998) and intimacy (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) while competitive modalities are related to lower marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1994; Hinde, 1997; Koerner & Jacobson, 1994; Kurdek, 1995).

Another important feature that has merely be ignored in previous studies concerns the couple's relationship with the family of origin. Scabini and Cigoli (2000) were among the first to address this

topic. Their approach (viewing the couple as the expression of the bond between sexes and generations), emphasises the presence (whether concrete or symbolic) of the family of origin in the life of every couple. According to this approach, each couple is considered to be a synthesis of two different family histories, demanding the inclusion of this aspect in studying couple's marital quality. In similar lines Lebow (1999) underlines the crucial role of the family of origin in the marital process. Relationships with families of origin have been studied either in a retrospective manner (Story, Lawrence, Karney, & Bradbury, 2004) or within the framework of social support theory. Different recently published studies, however, reveal the important link between social support from family members and marital quality (e.g., Allgood, Crane & Agee, 1997; Canary & Stafford, 1994; Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999; Wilson, McCulloch & Stone, 1997).

In this study positive and negative dimensions of marital life, styles of conflict (according to the approaches proposed by Gottman, 1994 and Fincham & Linfeld, 1997) as well as the relationship with the family of origin (according to the approach by Scabini & Cigoli, 2000) are considered in three different groups of couples: (a) satisfied couples, (b) distressed couples and (c) couples in marital therapy.

The following hypotheses will be tested in this study: we hypothesise that satisfied couples score higher in positive dimensions and score lower in negative dimensions than the two other groups, whereas dissatisfied couples show lower scores in positive dimensions and higher scores in negative dimensions. It is assumed that couples in therapy do the worst. Along with several authors (Fincham, 1998; Fincham & Lindfield, 1997; Gottman, 1994; Scabini & Cigoli, 2000) we speculate that all groups of couples are characterized by the co-presence of both positive and negative dimensions.

Regarding the ratio of positive and negative behavior (proposed by Gottman) we hypothesize to find a ratio of 5:1 in satisfied couples and a less balanced ratio in distressed couples and couples seeking for therapy.

We hypothesise that satisfied couples score higher in constructive conflict resolution styles (such as compromise) whereas dissatisfied couples show higher scores in destructive conflict resolution (such as offence and violence).

With regard to gender, it is expected that men (even in satisfied relationships) score higher in avoidant conflict resolution (Ball, Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Bertoni & Iafrate, 2000; Christensen & Shenk, 1991). In general, more gender differences in distressed couples and couples in therapy are expected (Denton, Stafford & Canary, 1994).

Furthermore, in light of studies that point to the quality of relationships with families of origin as a source of support for the couple and predictor of marital satisfaction (Scabini & Cigoli, 2000; Scabini & Iafrate, 2003), we hypothesise that differences will be found in satisfied compared to dissatisfied couples and couples in therapy with regard to the quantity and quality of relationships maintained with their families of origin.

Method

Participants

226 married couples participated in this study (85 satisfied couples, 55 dissatisfied couples and 86 couples in marital therapy). Groups were compared on socio-demographics to identify any differences between them. As shown in Table 1, couples were comparable in terms of age at marriage, years engaged and number of children.

Significant differences between the three groups were found with regard to age of spouses (wives: [F (2, 222) = 4.144; p<.05]; husbands: [F (2, 220) = 4.590; p<05]). The Scheffé test revealed that satisfied women were younger than dissatisfied women; dissatisfied husbands were older than satisfied husbands or husbands seeking for therapy.

Satisfied couples reported shorter marriages than distressed couples or couples in therapy [F (2, 222) = 4, 015; p < .05]. Scheffé test revealed that dissatisfied couples had been married for a longer period of time.

Differences among the three groups were also found for years of education [wives F (2, 220) = 8,344; $p < .01$; husbands F (2, 219) = 9.384; $p < .01$]. The Scheffé test revealed that the education level was lower in therapy couples than in satisfied couples (only for wives) and lower in therapy couples than in satisfied and dissatisfied couples, similar between each other (only for husbands). In order to control for these differences between the groups ANCOVAs controlling for duration of marriage, age and education will be computed.

Table 1

Measures

Demographic variables. Participants provided information on their age, sex, relationship duration, relationship satisfaction, number of children, education and profession.

Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) is a 15 items scale measuring both general marital satisfaction as well as agreement or disagreement on a number of issues (finances, recreation, affection, friends, sex, philosophy and in-laws) and relationship style (leisure, confiding..). Items are administered on a different point scale (ranging from 1-3 to 1-7). Its validity has been repeatedly evaluated and several studies underline its capacity to discriminate reliably between satisfied and distressed couples (e.g., Carrère, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, Ruckstuhl, 2000; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Freeston & Plechaty, 1997, Heyman, Sayers & Bellack, 1994).

Questionnaire evaluating one's own family of origin (Bertoni, 2000). The index is composed of 3 items. 2 items investigate the frequency of contacts with one's family of origin, being administered on a 3 point scale (from 1=not at all to 3=very true). A third item investigates on a 5 point scale (1=not at all to 5 =very much) the satisfaction experienced with respect to the relationship with one's parents[1] (item examples; "*After the wedding, the relationships with my origin family have become more frequent*", "*How satisfied are you with the relationship with your parents*?"). The index presents a sufficient internal consistency ($\underline{\alpha}$=.60).

[1] Standardized scores were created to account for the different modalities involved in answering the items that make up the index.

Questionnaire evaluating one's spouse's family of origin (Bertoni, 2000). The index is composed of 3 item: 2 items investigate the frequency of contacts with one's spouse's family of origin, being administred on a 3 point scale (from 1 = not at all to 3 = very true). A third item investigates on a 5 point scale (1=non at all to 5=very much) the satisfaction experienced with respect to relationship with with one's in-laws (item examples; "*After the wedding, the relationship with the family of origin of my spouse (husband/wife) have become more frequent*", "*How satisfied are you with the relationship with your parents-in-law*?". The index presents a sufficient internal consistency (α =.63).

The Disagreement Scale of Camara and Resnick (1989) in its Italian version (Lanz, Iafrate & Rosnati, 1997). It is a 12 items scale yielding informations about four styles of marital conflict, being administered on a 5-point scale (from 1=not at all to 3=absolutely true). The conflict styles are: offence (conflict style based on aggressive modalities characterised by irritation and verbal expressions that aim to wound the other person; item example: "*The more we discuss, the more I get angry*"; 4 items; α=.79); compromise (an indicator of attempts to negotiate and/or accept the other's point of view; item example: "*I try to reason with him/her*"; 4 items; α=.74); avoidance (a modality of escape and closure in response to conflictual situations; item example: "*I try to avoid talking about it"; 2 item;* α=.64); violence (expression of aggressive and violent behaviours; item example: "*I really get angry and I hit him/her"; 2 item;* α=.74).

A *scale on Togetherness* (Bertoni, 2000). Is a 7 items scale, being completed on a 5 point scale (from 1=disagree very much to 5=completely agree), yielding information about positive dimensions in the marital relationship. This scale is formed using items from the Communication Scale of Barnes and Olson (1985) as well as from the Support Scale of Scabini (1991). Item examples: "*I can count on my husband/wife when I need something*", "*My husband/wife always listens to me attentively*"; α=.90

A *scale on Distress* (Bertoni, 2000). This is a 7 items scale, being administered on a 5-point scale (from 1=disagree very much to 5=completely agree), yielding information about problematic

and negative dimensions in the marital relationship such as conflict, lack of intimacy, lack of commitment to the relationship and the inability to face changes that have involved one or both spouses. Item examples: "*My spouse is not interested in me any more*"; "*My commitment to this marriage (emotional investment, responsibility, attention to my spouse) has been greater than that of my spouse*"; α= .82.

Procedure

In order to identify and assemble a group composed of dissatisfied couples and another of satisfied couples, we looked up the literature (Fincham & Grych, 1991), which suggests that a request for marriage counselling and a low score on a synthetic index of marital adjustment constitute indicators of marital dissatisfaction.

Through the collaboration of centres of consultation we therefore recruited a group of couples in counselling (therapy) and through an advertisement campaign a control group. Both groups were married for similar periods of time (13 years). All couples in therapy completed questionnaires between the third and the fourth therapy session.

Both groups were administered a marital adjustment scale (Marital Adjustment Test, Locke & Wallace, 1959) in order to test the dissatisfaction of the couples in the experimental group and the satisfaction of the couples in the control group[2].

The results of the MAT showed that the control group was entirely broken up into two groups, the first group being composed of couples with high scores on the adjustment scale (hence, satisfied couples) and the second group of couples with low scores on the adjustment scale (hence, dissatisfied couples). All the couples that had sought counselling or therapy obtained low scores on the adjustment scale and were therefore dissatisfied. The MAT scores of the three groups are presented in the Table 1.

[2] We remind readers that the MAT produces an overall score that can vary from 2 to 158. The cut-off score has been identified as 100 (Busby, Christensen, Crane e Larson, 1995; Cohen, 1985), so that couples where both spouses have reached a score greater than 100 are considered to be satisfied Couples, while couples in which at least one of the spouses obtains a score less than this cut-off value are considered to be dissatisfied Couples.

Significant differences between the three groups were found with regard to MAT scores (wives: [F (2, 171) = 223.341; p<.01]; husbands: [F (2, 171) = 141.541; p<.01]).

Data analyses

In order to control for significant differences in sociodemographic variables between the three groups, the various subscales were subjected to 3 (group: therapy, satisfied, dissatisfied couples) x 2 (gender) univariate analyses (ANCOVAs) with repeated measures (controlling for duration of marriage, wife's and husband's age, wife's and husband's years of education). The variable group was considered as a between subject variable, gender as a within subject variable (see Bray, Maxwell & Cole, 1995). In all cases of significant interaction effects, posteriori tests (Scheffé) were conducted to assess which groups differed from each other.

Before conducting ANCOVAs we verified correlations among the variables considered in order to control for multicollinearity (see Table 3). The variables showed no high intercorrelations.

Table 3

Results

Differences among the three groups with regard to Togetherness

The ANCOVA with repeated measures revealed a significant main effect of the group factor [F (2,187) = 77,160; p<.001]: therapy couples score lower than dissatisfied couples and dissatisfied couples score lower than satisfied couples.

Neither the interaction between group and gender [F (2,187) = ,262; ns] nor the within factor [F (1, 187) = .008, ns] showed a significant effect. The covariates (age of wife, age of husband, duration of marriage, wife's years of education and husband's years of education) didn't yield significant effects.

Tables 4, 5, 6

Differences among the three groups with regard to Distress

There was a significant group effect [F (2,183) = 197,25; p < .001], showing that therapy couples scored higher than dissatisfied couples and dissatisfied couples scored higher than satisfied couples. It didn't emerge any significant effect of the within factor [F (1, 183) = .724, ns]. However, the interaction between group and gender showed a marginal effect [F (2,183) = 2,975; p= .054]: only women of the therapy group rated higher scores of distress than men [F (1, 183) = 8,490; p<.01]. The covariates controlled did not yield any significant effects.

The coexistence of togetherness and distress in the three groups

Figure 1, composed of average scores obtained by subjects for Togetherness and Distress, demonstrates the coexistence of both dimensions in all three groups of couples.

Figure 1

As expected couples in therapy were those characterised by the highest levels of distress and the satisfied couples scored highest on levels of togetherness, it is interesting to note that the dissatisfied couples were found at intermediate levels on both factors.

We can observe that there are dimensions common to both satisfied and dissatisfied couples: we find the presence of distress in satisfied couples as well as the presence of togetherness in dissatisfied couples. This demonstrates that in both marital satisfaction as well as marital dissatisfaction togetherness and distress co-exist.

Differences between the three groups with regard to Gottman's ratio:

Referring to Gottman's balance theory, positive variables and negative variables were separately summed, for husbands and wives, and the ratio was computed.

The computation of ratio is (quality of the relationship with one's own family of origin + quality of the relationship with one's spouse's family of origin + togetherness + compromise) divided by (distress + violence + avoidance + offence)[3].

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[3] Standardised scores were created to account for the different modalities involved in answering to the items that make up the indexes.

The positive-to-negative ratio for the three groups of couples is: satisfied couples: women: 4.0 : 1.7; men: 4.1 : 1.6; dissatisfied couples: women: 3.5 : 2.2; men: 3.5 : 2.1; therapy couples: women: 3.0 : 2.9; men 3.1: 2.8

We didn't find in the satisfied couples the ratio 5:1 suggested by Gottman, but in line with his balance theory we found a different ratio between positivity and negativity among the three groups of couples.

It's interesting to note that, in contrast with satisfied couples and dissatisfied couples whose balance favours positivity and positivity is exceeding a lot the negativity, in therapy couples the positivity scores are almost equivalent to negativity ones.

Differences between the three groups with regard to conflict resolution:

Compromise: The results of the ANCOVA performed on the distress score revealed a main effect of the group factor [$F(2,193) = 20.114$; $p<.001$]: therapy couples and dissatisfied couples scored lower than satisfied couples.

Neither the interaction effect (group x couple member) [$F(2,193) = .753$; ns] nor the main effect of the within-subjects factor [$F(1, 193) = .084$, ns] were statistically significant.

The covariates did not yield significant effects, apart from age of husbands [$F(1,193) = 5.739$; $p<.05$].

Offence: A significant effect of the group factor was found [$F(2,196) = 35,673$; $p<.001$]; therapy couples showed higher levels of offence compared to dissatisfied couples and satisfied ones; moreover dissatisfied couples reported higher levels of offence than satisfied ones.

Neither the interaction effect (group x gender) [$F(2,196) = .575$; ns] nor the main effect of the within-subjects factor [$F(1, 196) = .784$, ns] was statistically significant. The covariates controlled did not yield significant effects. Only age of wife [$F(1, 196) = 3.236$; $p<.10$] and age of husband [$F(1, 196) = 3.165$; $p<.10$] showed a tendency towards a significant effect.

Avoidance:

A significant effect of the factor group [F (2,197) = 17.418; p<.001] emerged; therapy couples and dissatisfied couples scored higher than satisfied couples. The interaction (group x couple member) showed a tendency towards a significant effect [F (2,197) = 2,595; p<.10]: husbands rated higher scores of avoidance than women only in dissatisfied couples [F (1, 197) = 7.517; p<.01].

No significant effect of the within factor [F (1, 197) = .988, ns] neither of the covariates were found. Only age of wife [F (1, 197) = 6.345; p<.05] yielded significant effects.

Violence:

A significant effect of the group factor [F (2,196) = 8.738; p<.001] emerged: therapy couples and dissatisfied couples scored higher than satisfied couples. It should be noted, however, even when taking into account the differences due to gender and group, that violence as a conflict style was found at very low levels in the sample as a whole.

Neither the interaction effect [F (2,196) = .148; ns] nor the main effect of the within factor [F (1, 196) = .191, ns] showed a significant effect. Again the covariates were not significant either.

Differences between the three groups with regard to relationships with families of origin (as suggested, we investigated –in a dyadic perspective- either the relationship with own family of origin (=my family) or the relationship with spouse's family of origin (=my in-laws).

Quality of relationship with *own* family of origin. The group factor showed a significant effect [F (2,156) = 13,828; p<.001]: therapy couples and dissatisfied couples scored lower than satisfied couples. Neither the interaction effect [F (2,156) = 1.255; ns] nor the effect of the within factor [F (1, 156) = 2.538, ns] turned out significant. The covariates did not yield significant effects.

Quality of relationship with *spouse's* family of origin

The group factor showed a significant effect [F (2,145) = 34,290; p<.001]: therapy couples score lower than dissatisfied couples and dissatisfied couples score lower than satisfied couples.

Neither the interaction [F (2,145) = .254; ns] nor the within factor [F (1, 145) = .190, ns] showed a significant effect. The covariates controlled did not yield significant effects.

Discussion

In this contribution differences among satisfied, dissatisfied couples and couples in therapy were examined, based on a sample of 226 married couples, with regard to several important features of marital quality such as positive and negative dimensions of marital functioning, conflicts and their relationship to the family of origins. Although some studies distinguishing these three groups have been published in the last decades (e.g. Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Hahlweg, Schindler & Revenstorf, 1982), it is noteworthy that most of the studies simply distinguish between satisfied and unsatisfied couples. By considering unhappy couples as well as couples in therapy more information on the functioning of dissatisfied couples may be available, as not all the couples who scored low in marital satisfaction sought for marital therapy thus both groups represent two different kinds of dissatisfied couples enriching the analyses and thus contributing substantially to the current knowledge on couples functioning.

Our results show that most of the hypotheses formulated above could be supported.

As far as the conceptualisation of marital functioning is concerned, we found that our results, confirming our hypothesis, affirm that marital quality is not necessarily the opposite of marital distress, since they are comprised of aspects of distress and togetherness common to both (e.g., Fincham & Linfield, 1997). Compatible with our assumptions togetherness and distress characterised all three groups that were analysed (satisfied couples, dissatisfied couples, couples in therapy), even if, obviously, togetherness characterised more strongly the functioning of satisfied couples and distress connoted more decisively the functioning of couples in therapy.

Interesting differences among the three groups were also found with regard to the ratio (positivity : negativity) proposed by Gottman (1993).[Regulated couples maintain a balance in which positivity exceed negativity, whereas nonregulated couples have a ratio in which the negativity equals or exceeds the positivity (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). This is an interesting finding that could spur further reflection if we read it with reference to the Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Looking at our data, we can consider the positive dimensions to be

"benefits" and the negative dimensions to be "costs". According to this theory and its recent findings, dissatisfaction may come from an unfavourable balance in which the relationship benefits can not exceed the costs it requires.

However, with respect to the ways in which the spouses deal with conflict, we observed, as hypothesized above, that satisfied couples are different from the others since they obtained the lowest levels of offence, avoidance and violence and the highest levels of compromise.

This result is in line with a recent study showing that partners who can handle conflict more constructively, with more positive communication and less negative interactions, create an environment that allows for lower levels of self-disclosure and acceptance of vulnerabilities, which are central aspects of intimacy (Cordova & Dorian, in press).

The couples in therapy were similar to the dissatisfied couples in levels of avoidance, compromise and violence but were different from them since they showed the highest levels of offence[4]. Offence is the only style present at significantly different levels in each group.

The couples in therapy, significantly more often than the others, "act out" conflict through destructive modalities, specifically by attacking and wounding each other.

The fact that therapy couples differed from distressed couplet only in the levels of offence, tells us that only when the conflict is enacted in a destructive and painful way, a couple asks for therapeutic help. This result confirms the findings of a recent studies (Sillars, Roberts, Leonard & Dun, 2000; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991) demonstrating that conflict negativity is not influenced by its content but by the quality of the relationship. The conflict becomes violent when the couple presents deficits in problem solving skills and biased in understanding the partner's intentions; for example aggressive men more than non aggressive men tend to link the conflict to the hostile intentions of their wives (Holtwworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993).

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[4] It should be noted that violence in satisfied and dissatisfied couples is almost non-existent, while it is present, although at low levels, in couples in therapy.

In these cases the therapeutic intervention enhancing the couple's skills and explaining the interpretation biases is welcome. Such aggression can be target of relationship education program too (Holtwworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993).

Furthermore our results supported the hypotheses, that the quality of relationships with one's family of origin is higher in satisfied couples as compared to dissatisfied couples and couples in therapy, who did not differ from each other. The relationship with the spouse's family of origin were better in satisfied couples than dissatisfied couples and were better in dissatisfied couples than therapy couples. This finding confirms the findings by Coyne and De Longis (1986) who emphasised that dissatisfied couples were more isolated in terms of family support. This result shows the importance of the interdependence within the family network for the conjugal adjustment(Kearns & Leonard, 2004).

The hypothesis on the avoidance of men is only partially confirmed: husbands were more avoidant than wives but only in dissatisfied couples. It is noteworthy that gender differences were not present in satisfied couples an couples in therapy. This may indicate that, in spite of an high dissatisfaction, having sought for therapy could guide the husbands to be less avoidant in conflicts. In satisfied couples we did not find any gender differences, which is controversy to findings from other investigators (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990).. Thus, the hypothesis on gender differences is only partially confirmed and we found, in accordance to the literature, only few differences due to gender. Only in the group of couples in therapy, wives, as compared to husbands, reported higher scores in distress. This finding seems to confirm, most importantly, that differences due to gender appear in cases of high levels of marital dissatisfaction and that wives above all take notice of such situations, in line with previous research demonstrating that women show greater vigilance of relationship issues than men (Acitelli & Young, 1996; Sillars et al., 2000). Moreover only in couples in therapy husbands and wives did not perceive a difference in the presence of positive and negative dimensions.

This study has several strengths, such as the distinction between dissatisfied couples and dissatisfied couples in therapy, the consideration of two similarly important dimensions of marital function in evaluating positive and negative dimensions and the integration of the relationship with the family of origin. Recent studies on families of origin (e.g., Weigel, Bennet & Ballard-Reisch, 2003; Story et al., 2004) in fact asked the spouses for retrospective accounts on their families but they did not investigate their present relationships with them, in order to investigate the link between the relationship with the families of origin and the own current marital satisfaction. Thus, this aspect was novel and original in this study. However, there are also several limits of this study. First, the cross sectional nature of the study does not allow testing for the direction of the relationships. For instance, it is hard to know whether low marital satisfaction is due to the bad relationship with one's family of origin or whether this is a consequence of one's own marital distress and social withdrawal. Furthermore, it is possible that all information is biased by the severity of marital troubles and its retrospective nature (Frye & Karney, 2004). It is known for example that dissatisfied couples may tend to overestimate their negative aspects; so that their memory is congruent with the present mood they are experiencing. Thus, distressed couples are more likely to remember negative events than positive ones (Carrère et al., 2000). As only self-report data were available this bias could not be ruled out. Only studies using observational and process oriented methods could avoid this bias (Bradbury & Karney, 2004).

Regardless of these limits, we are convinced that this study further contributes to the puzzle of knowledge on marital functioning and yields novel and additional information on the understanding of marital life. Our findings may also be relevant for clinical work with couples either in the context of therapy or prevention (e.g., Bodenmann & Bertoni, 2004; Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004), mainly with the focus on strengthening positive dimensions, dyadic resources and also working on the relationship with the family of origins.

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Table 1: Descriptives on Socio-Demographic Variables.

	Satisfied couples (n = 85)						Dissatisfied couples (n= 55)						Couples in therapy (n = 86)					
	M		SD		Range		M		SD		Range		M		SD		Range	
	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H
Age	38.2	41.1	11.06	10.9	20-61	26-67	42.9	46.1	9.61	10.09	23-60	30-69	39.4	41.9	7.8	8.23	24-56	25-60
Age at marriage	25.9	28.8	4.58	5.41	18-49	20-52	24.8	29	5.22	4.86	18-36	22-50	25.8	28.3	4.84	4.84	18-47	21-46
Years of education	14.43	14.88	4.26	4.33	5-22	5-22	13.49	15.21	3.33	4.42	5-22	5-22	12.29	12.46	3.92	4.08	5-22	5-22
Years of marriage	11.5		11.4		1-38		16.4		9.86		1-36		13		8.72		1-32	
Years engaged	4.7		2.99		1-13		3.9		1.99		1-10		4.5		2.81		1-15	
Marital satisfaction	120.19 (11.9)		119.83 (12.9)				85.98 (21.34)		82.70 (22.17)				27.10 (29.80)		32.42 (35.11)			
Number of offspring	1.42		1.32		0-5		1.58		0.99		0-5		1.33		0.90		0-3	

Table 3: Correlations for all variables

WOMEN / **MEN**		Quality own family origin	Quality spouse's family origin	Offence	Compromise	Violence	Avoidance	Positive dimensions	Negative dimensions
Quality own family origin	Pearson Correlation	**,314*** **	**,317*** **	-,006	,057	**,187** **	-,075	,142	-,032
Quality spouse's family origin	Pearson Correlation	**,308*** **	**,236** **	**-,158***	,110	-,008	-,053	**,228** **	**-,165***
Offense	Pearson Correlation	**-,217** **	**-,320*** **	**,260*** **	**-,419*** **	**,464*** **	**,327*** **	**-,289*** **	**,361*** **
Compromise	Pearson Correlation	**,167***	**,178***	**-,287*** **	,112	**-,204** **	**-,270*** **	,076	-,086
Violence	Pearson Correlation	-,135	-,073	**,454*** **	**-,141***	,089	,107	-,127	**,273*** **
Avoidance	Pearson Correlation	-,118	-,112	**,335*** **	**-,263*** **	**,139***	,072	-,115	,190
Positive dimensions	Pearson Correlation	**,192** **	**,265*** **	**-,346*** **	**,191** **	**-,226** **	**-,220** **	**,553*** **	**-,639*** **
Negative dimensions		**-,213** **	**-,282*** **	**,475*** **	**-,194** **	**,311*** **	**,325*** **	**-,680*** **	**,712*** **

Note. Correlation scores of the women are presented above the diagonal; the correlation scores of the men are presented below the diagonal; correlation scores between the dyad members are presented along the diagonal.

Figure 1: Average subject scores for positive and negative dimensions

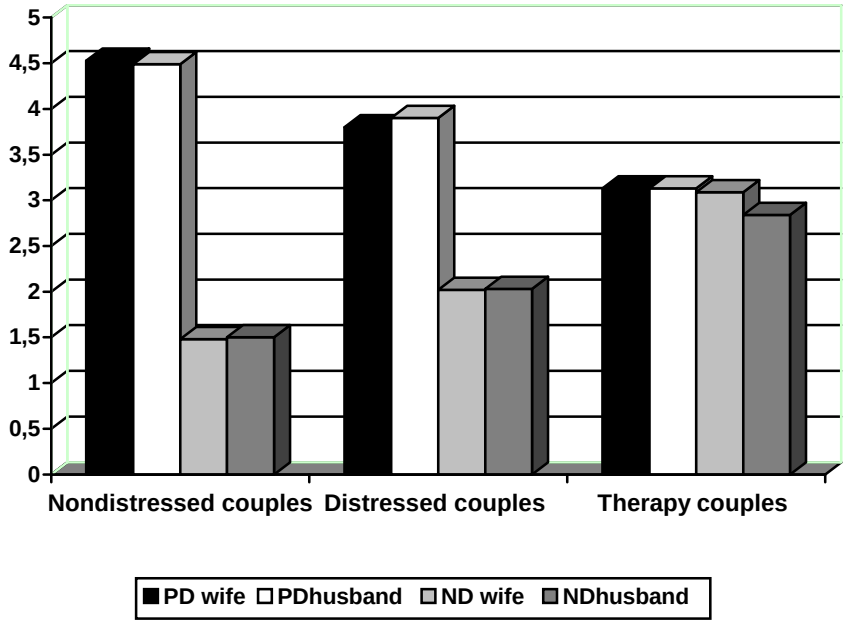

Table 4: Means and standard deviations and F-statistics for all variables

	Satisfied couples		Dissatisfied couples		Couples in therapy	
	Wives (N = 85)	Husbands (N = 85)	Wives (N = 55)	Husbands (N = 55)	Wives (N = 86)	Husbands (N = 86)
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
Offense	1.90 (.68)	1.78 (.64)	2.45 (.79)	2.22 (.91)	2.70 (.87)	2.61 (.82)
Avoidance	1.86 (.94)	1.84 (.87)	2.14 (.94)	2.67 (1.04)	2.33 (1.06)	2.27 (.99)
Violence	1.06 (.21)	1.05 (.24)	1.15 (.50)	1.21 (.55)	1.34 (.65)	1.33 (.73)
Compromise	3.50 (.75)	3.79 (.82)	3.09 (.78)	3.10 (.69)	3.04 (.85)	3.21 (.71)
Togetherness	4.50 (.67)	4.54 (.53)	3.80 (.92)	3.89 (.80)	3.17 (1.01)	3.07 (.92)
Distress	1.48 (.32)	1.50 (.37)	2.02 (.57)	2.05 (.59)	3.07 (.65)	2.83 (.66)
Satisfaction own family	.20 (.68)	.32 (.67)	-.23 (.65)	-.00 (.65)	-.24 (.80)	-.33 (.72)
Satisfaction fam.in law	.36 (.73)	.37 (.63)	.01 (.70)	.08 (.60)	-.42 (.60)	-.45 (.74)
Ratio	2.54 (.78)	2.72 (.85)	1.70 (.72)	1.80 (.73)	1.10 (.34)	1.24 (.38)

	F group	F gender	F group*gender	F age partners		F duration of marriage	F education	
				W	H		W	H
Offense	35.673***	.784	.575	3.236	3.165+	.164	.111	1.855
Avoidance	17.418***	.988	2.595+	6.345*	1.236	2.504	.343	.949
Violence	8.738***	.191	.148	.253	.380	.219	.019	.651
Compromise	20.114***	.084	.753	2.377	5.739*	2.416	.006	2.478
Togetherness	77.160***	008	.262	1.071	.181	2.166	.824	.000
Distress	197.25***	.724	2.975+	.000	2.631	2.146	.179	2.098
Satisfaction own family	13.828***	2.538	1.255	.272	2.662	.756	.284	.007
Satisfaction family in law	34.290***	.190	.254	.267	.028	.006	2.425	.010
Ratio	142.507***	.294	.464	.000	2.63	2.146	.179	2.098

+ p<.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

Table 6. Scheffé-tests for a comparison of the different groups

	Group	Gender	Group x gender
Togetherness	Satisfied > Dissatisfied > Therapy***	*ns*	*ns*
Distress	Therapy > Dissatisfied > Satisfied***	*ns*	Therapy couples: wives > husbands+
Avoidance	Therapy > Satisfied*** Dissatisfied > Satisfied***	*ns*	Dissatisfied couples: husbands > wives**
Violence	Therapy > Satisfied*** Dissatisfied > Satisfied***	*ns*	*ns*
Compromise	Satisfied > Dissatisfied Satisfied > Therapy	*ns*	*ns*
Offense	Therapy > Dissatisfied > Satisfied	*ns*	*ns*
Satisfaction own family	Satisfied > Dissatisfied Satisfied > Therapy	*ns*	*ns*
Satisfaction family in law	Satisfied > Dissatisfied > Therapy	*ns*	*ns*
Ratio	Satisfied > Dissatisfied > Therapy	*ns*	*ns*